

GOURMET

AUSTRALIAN

FEBRUARY 1993

TRAVELLER

\$5.70*
NZ \$8.95
(incl. GST)

COOL FOOD

Italian Ices
Summer Fruit Pies

HOT SPOTS

California Missions
Flinders Ranges
Morocco
Left Bank Chic



Granita di caffè





T

hey sit like grand, world-weary old ladies, their crumbling adobe walls and patched plaster proclaiming a dignified indifference to the high-rise towers and bustling freeways around them – gracious, melancholy relics of a distant past. Few visitors to the US West Coast know of their turbulent, sometimes violent history, for the missions of California are the Golden State's best-kept secret. But for more than a century, they played a crucial role in its history. Without them, California as we know it might not even have existed ... it might well have become part of Russia.

When explorers first sighted California's coast, they found it so appealing they thought they had discovered an island inhabited by beautiful, dark-skinned Amazons. Even the tough-minded Spaniards couldn't help but marvel at the exotic, semi-arid landscape and at the elegant but simple lifestyle of the California Indians, a peaceful, artistic people, who hunted and fished and lived in harmony with each other.

In 1769, the year James Cook set sail for Australia, a Franciscan monk named Junipero Serra, accompanied by priests and soldiers, set off from Mexico by mule train for a gruelling 1600km trek through wilderness to establish a mission at San Diego and to bring Christianity to the 100,000 Indians who lived along California's shores. Part of his mission also was to open up settlement of California and to halt the incursions of the Russians, who had already built several forts on its northern coast.

For the Spanish, monks were cost-effective colonisers. They received no pay and their needs were few. Devout followers of St Francis of Assisi, their only ambitions were to convert Indians. Serra was in his mid-50s when he set out for California but he didn't flinch from the task. Here was the opportunity of his life. The 18th century offered just two avenues to glory for an ambitious man: the army or the church. Serra, the son of a farmer, was short and walked with a limp, which ruled out any military career. So he joined the Franciscans at an early age, then travelled to Mexico to begin missionary work.

A short time after arriving in San Diego, he found him-

**Text and photography
by Virginia Westbury**

The bell tower of San Carlos Borromeo mission, left, near the picturesque town of Carmel. Right, poppies on the Big Sur coastline



The Spanish came to California to convert, then "civilise" the natives. The missions that dot the state are remnants of that dream, and a reminder of how it almost destroyed the Indian people

The

CALIFORNIA

Missions

